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Published in:
Monist

DOI:
[10.1093/monist/onz006](https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onz006)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Hindriks, F. (2019). The Duty to Join Forces: When Individuals Lack Control. *Monist*, 102(2), 204-220.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onz006>

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The Duty to Join Forces: When Individuals Lack Control

Frank Hindriks*

ABSTRACT

Some harms are such that they cannot be prevented by a single individual because she lacks the requisite control. Because of this, no individual has the obligation to do so. It may be, however, that the harm can be prevented when several individuals combine their efforts. I argue that in many such situations each individual has a duty to join forces: to approach others, convince them to contribute, and subsequently make a co-ordinated effort to prevent the harm. A distinctive feature of this proposal is that, in the first instance, it focuses on mobilizing others rather than on preventing the outcome. As it ultimately concerns a collective harm, the duty to join forces is irreducibly collective. Furthermore, once enough people have been mobilized, they have a collective obligation to prevent the harm that is irreducibly collective also because it applies to the collective as such.

Many harms can be prevented or mitigated only by the combined efforts of several agents. Think, for instance, of someone who is trapped under heavy beams, of farmers who overgraze a common area, or of ocean pollution. In such cases, the agents lack control over the outcome. Even so, it often seems plausible to attribute an obligation to prevent the harm to those involved. And this suggests that they bear a collective responsibility in some sense of the term. Attributions of collective responsibility can be conceived of in one of two ways, reductive or nonreductive. According to the reductive conception, each agent has an obligation to contribute to the preventive effort (Feinberg 1968; Miller 2001). The nonreductive conception attributes an obligation to prevent the harm to the collective as such (Feinberg 1968; Schwenkenbecher 2013; Björnsson 2014; Wringer 2016). In this paper, I defend a third hybrid conception of collective responsibility. In many cases in which individuals lack control, each individual agent has an obligation to mobilize others. And once enough people have joined in, they ought to collectively prevent the harm. They have what I call ‘a duty to join forces’.

Reducibility plays a central role not only in the literature on collective responsibility but also in that on social ontology. The question whether social groups can be reduced to individuals is complicated by the fact that groups can differ along a number

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of dimensions. Some groups are established from the inside by means of group identification; others are externally determined, for instance by their oppressors (Young 1990; Pierik 2004; Hindriks 2017). Some are organized, but many are not. And, more controversially, some but not all are agents (French 1984; List and Pettit 2011). In this paper, I focus on what Virginia Held (1970) calls “random collectives.” The members of such collectives have no significant ties to one another, at least no ties that are relevant for the issue at hand. The only (relevant) connection between them concerns some outcome: they can prevent a harm by combining their efforts. Such collectives are as such obviously reducible to the individuals of which they consist. One might think that this entails that they cannot bear irreducibly collective responsibilities. The argument of this paper reveals that this is mistaken.

After discussing the notions of moral responsibility and collective responsibility in sections 1 and 2, I introduce the duty to join forces in section 3. This obligation consists of two stages: mobilizing others and preventing the harm. Point of departure is the claim that a random collective has a duty to prevent an outcome only if enough of its members are ready to suitably combine their preventive efforts. Furthermore, such a collective often acquires this duty only after a sufficient number of members have been mobilized. Finally, its members have a duty to engage others in this collective endeavor. As the individual obligations are in the first instance directed not at the outcome but at other individuals, the duty to join forces is what I call ‘a lateral responsibility’.¹

In sections 4 and 5, I argue that the first stage of the duty to join forces, the obligation to mobilize others, is reducible in that it attaches to individual agents (but its content is irreducibly collective). The second stage is irreducible in that, once enough individuals have joined in, the collective as such has an obligation to do prevent the harm. I argue, however, that its responsibility cannot come apart from those of its members. Proponents of irreducible collective responsibility commonly defend their view in terms of ‘the Irreducibility Thesis’ (Hindriks 2009): a collective can be responsible for an action or outcome without any members bearing a correlative responsibility. Even though it involves irreducibly collective responsibility, the Irreducibility Thesis does not apply to the duty to join forces.

1. MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

You ought to save a child that is drowning in a pond, at least when the costs of doing so are not too high (Singer 1972). As it concerns the future, an obligation such as this one is a forward-looking moral responsibility. After the fact, you are answerable for what you did or failed to do. You are then morally responsible in the backward-looking sense. This means that you are a candidate for praise or blame. An agent can be morally responsible for actions or outcomes.² In this paper, I focus on outcomes. More specifically, I focus on harmful outcomes, such as the death of the child. I do not explore here whether and if so how my proposal generalizes to other moral concerns such as justice.

Suppose that there is a pending harm. Obviously, it would be good if it were prevented. It need not be, however, that anyone is responsible for doing so. In order for this to be the case, there has to be a *moral* agent who is *able* to do it and *foresees* the

pending harm or should foresee it. Furthermore, such an agent bears responsibility only if she has *no excuse or justification*. As the italicized terms suggest, an agent has to meet four conditions in order to be responsible for an outcome. As doing so will turn out to be useful below, I briefly elaborate on each of them (without pretending to discuss them exhaustively).³

The Agency Condition: The agent is a moral or normatively competent agent. She is able to grasp normative considerations and bring them to bear on her decisions and actions (Wallace 1994). In other roughly equivalent words, the agent is both receptive and reactive to moral reasons, or reason-responsive (Fischer and Ravizza 1999). Young children and psychopaths are commonly used examples of agents that fail to be moral agents in this sense. Throughout the paper, I assume that the agents that I am concerned with are indeed moral agents.

The Causal Condition: The agent is able to prevent the harmful outcome (Vranas 2007). For my purposes, this is the crucial feature of the Causal Condition. But it does not exhaust it. As Harry Frankfurt (1969) observes, philosophers used to insist that the agent could have done otherwise and prevent the outcome from materializing. One of many alternatives that have been defended is that it suffices if the agent is able to refrain from contributing to it (Alvarez 2009). I will not try to settle here which is the correct alternative. All I need to do here is to identify the ability to prevent harm as a necessary condition for being causally responsible for it.

The Epistemic Condition: The agent consciously knows about the pending harm (Held 1970; Levy 2014). It may well be that this widely accepted condition is too strong. Perhaps justifiable belief suffices, or some form of nonoccurrent awareness (Arpaly 2002; Smith 2006). It could also be that an agent is epistemically responsible in virtue of the fact that she *should* know or justifiably believe that, if no one intervenes, the harmful outcome will materialize (Ginet 2000). However, if my argument works for the strong formulation, it will generalize to the weaker ones. As I discuss shortly, the Epistemic Condition extends beyond the harmful outcome to the likelihood of success of preventing it.

The No-Defeaters Condition: *The agent does not have an excuse or justification* (Wallace 1994). Suppose you are witnessing the child drowning in the pond. Under normal conditions you will be obligated to save her. However, you do not have an obligation to do so if you recently broke a leg. And it may well be that your obligation to save the child is overridden by another obligation if you can instead save the lives of five children who are about to be crushed by a falling tree nearby. Or the risks might be too high for you because there might be a crocodile waiting to attack you on entering the water.

An important issue that I invoke below is that nobody has an obligation to do something that is futile. Because of this, the likelihood of success is of crucial importance for establishing whether someone is under an obligation. Although this is primarily an epistemic feature, it also involves the Causal Condition and the No-Defeaters Condition. How high the likelihood of success is, depends on causal factors (Causal Condition). How high the likelihood of success should be, depends on the costs to the agent relative to the moral stakes (No-Defeater Condition). For instance, nobody can reasonably be expected to do something excessively dangerous.

These considerations come together in what I call ‘the Prospect Clause’: The agent’s effort to prevent the harm is sufficiently likely to succeed given the costs and the stakes. An agent is responsible for a harmful outcome exactly if each of the four conditions is met.

2. COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The duty to join forces, which I present and defend in this paper, concerns what I call ‘a collective harm’. This is a harm that can be prevented only by means of the combined efforts of several individual agents. By definition, any particular individual fails to meet the Causal Condition for such harms. This implies that, if there is a responsibility to prevent such a harm, it is the responsibility of some collective. Another central feature of the duty to join forces is that is the obligation of a random collective or an unorganized group. However, unorganized groups are not agents. Hence, they fail to meet the Agency Condition. In section 4, I ask whether any of the four conditions has to be reformulated in order to accommodate responsibility for collective harms. First, however, I introduce different conceptions of collective responsibility.

Various kinds of collective responsibility can be distinguished along two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the kind of collective at issue. A collective can be organized or unorganized. Organized groups are collections of individuals that decide and act as a unit. According to a widely accepted view, the mark of collective agency is making decisions by means of a collective decision procedure (Held 1970; French 1984; Tuomela 1995; List and Pettit 2011).⁴ Unorganized group collectives have not adopted such a procedure. They can make ad hoc decisions to act together, but they have not developed a sustained practice of doing so. However, their members can coordinate their actions such that some collective outcome materializes. Because of this, only organized groups are agents. Thus, unorganized groups are nonagential collectives. The second dimension concerns the question whether the responsibility of a collective can be understood in reductive or nonreductive terms. As a first approximation, a responsibility is irreducibly collective if it attaches to the collective as such. If it does not, the collective responsibility can be explicated in reductive or individual terms. Let me illustrate these distinctions by briefly discussing two of the four possibilities: organized and nonreductive and unorganized and reductive.

Unorganized and reductive. Joel Feinberg (1968) considers a thousand people who are lolling on a beach when at some point one of the swimmers is drowning. He argues that each of the people on the beach has an obligation to save the drowning swimmer until enough of them have taken action. This responsibility is collective in that a thousand people have an obligation that has the same object. As each individual can fulfill it all by himself, the responsibility is also reductive.

Organized and nonreductive. Peter French (1984) considers the 1981 Paris plane crash of a DC-10 and argues that McDonnell-Douglas bears responsibility for it. The main deficiency that led to the crash were faulty inspection procedures that invited inspectors to be “lax and careless” (French 1984, 141). No individual could reasonably be held accountable for them. French argues that it is implausible to regard the inspectors as primarily responsible for the crash. However, due to the faulty

inspection procedure the company as such is to blame. As none of the members is to blame, at least not to any significant extent, the responsibility of McDonnell Douglas is irreducibly collective.⁵

3. THE DUTY TO JOIN FORCES

The duty to join forces is the obligation of an unorganized group to prevent a collective harm. It consists of the obligation to mobilize others and make a coordinated effort to prevent the harm. As this description reveals, the duty to join forces consists of two stages. During the first stage, individuals approach others to express their willingness to contribute to preventing the harm. Furthermore, if need be, they encourage others to do the same. During the second stage, those who have in fact joined the collective effort in this way act such that their combined efforts prevent the harm.

In order to prevent a collective harm, several individuals have to act. How many depends on the harm at issue. Because it requires contributions from a particular number of individuals, or so I assume, the willingness that some individual expresses during the first stage is in principle conditional on enough others joining in for a coordinated effort to be successful. Now, when a group member approaches another member, that other person ought to respond positively. This means that, if an individual is approached by someone else, she is obliged to express her conditional willingness to contribute in response. She thereby joins the collective endeavor. Once a sufficient number of individuals have joined in, they incur the obligation to collectively prevent the pending harm. As discussed below, this requires them to coordinate their actions, if not cooperate. In contrast to the duty to incorporate (Held 1970; Collins 2013), the relevant individuals do not need to form a collective agent.⁶

As an illustration of the duty to join forces, consider a variant of Singer's pond example. In the original version, a child is drowning in a shallow pond, which is why I call it "Shallow Pond." Consider now an adult man who is drowning in a deep pond. Two people are needed for saving him. I call this variant "Deep Pond." Now, surely it would be good if the man were prevented from drowning. The question is, however, whether there is an obligation to prevent him from drowning; and, if so, who has it and what is its content.

When presenting Shallow Pond, Peter Singer imagines himself walking past the pond. Suppose now that he is walking past the deep pond together with Peter Unger. They see the drowning man. Presumably, they can reasonably be expected to take action. The most distinctive feature of the example is the causal structure of the situation. When considered on their own, neither of the two Peters is able to prevent the outcome. But they would prevent it, were they to combine their efforts. So, even though neither of them is able to prevent the pending harm, the two of them are. Furthermore, I assume that they are both moral agents, that both are consciously aware of all relevant factors, and that neither has an excuse or a justification that could defeat any responsibility they might have. This means that the Agency, Epistemic, and No-Defeaters Conditions are met. Under these conditions, it appears, they have a collective obligation to save the drowning man.

But how can they save him? It seems that one of them needs to take the initiative, and the other should follow suit. Suppose Peter Singer takes the initiative. Peter Unger is initially somewhat reluctant to take action and has to be pushed a little to do so (perhaps because of his skepticism about moral responsibility). Singer convinces him to contribute to the joint effort. Once the two have joined forces in this way, they act together such that the man is saved. This description of what is needed to save the drowning man settles what kind of obligation the relevant individuals have. Initially, each has an obligation to express willingness to contribute and to get the other to do so as well. Subsequently, they have the obligation to act accordingly and save the drowning man by acting together. In other words, they have a duty to join forces.

Importantly, the duty to join forces can also apply to situations in which individuals need not act together in order to achieve the desired outcome. Consider Fishpond.⁷ In this example, two people, Alice and Bertha, live at opposite sides of a large pond. Each of them regularly paints her boat. At some point, the fish in the pond start to die. Alice and Bertha discover that this happens because the solvent they use is toxic to the fish, something they had no reason to suspect earlier. In order for the remaining ones to survive, both Alice and Bertha have to stop using the polluting solvent. Now surely it would be good for the fish to live. But does this imply that Alice and Bertha have a duty to stop using the polluting solvent? Not necessarily.

Suppose each of them has reason to believe the other will continue using the solvent even if she stops doing so. In that situation, it is pointless to stop using it unilaterally. This suggests that doing so is supererogatory at best. Things change, however, if each acquires adequate reason to believe that he or she can rely on the other to stop as well. When both Alice and Bertha have such a reason, each can reasonably be expected to stop using the solvent. But how do they acquire this reason? Presumably, they have to communicate with one another. Each has to express his or her willingness to stop using the solvent. And perhaps one of them first has to convince the other that this is the thing to do. In other words, they have to join forces and make a coordinated effort to prevent the fish from dying. In light of this, I conclude that they have a duty to join forces.

An important intuition that supports this conception of collective responsibility is that agents do not have obligations to do things that are futile. In Deep Pond, it would almost be foolish for one person to try and save the person knowing full well that he won't succeed without help. In this case, preventing the harm is a joint action that is constituted by two contributory actions. One might think, however, that in Fishpond each individual should simply stop using the solvent irrespective of what the other does. In this case the preventive effort consists of a composite action the components of which can be performed independently. Even so, I submit that doing so is supererogatory, as also in Fishpond a single contribution has no effect.

Individuals should have some reason to believe that the collective effort to which they contribute will be successful. This depends in part on whether they can rely on others to contribute as well. Hence, they need some reason to believe that enough others will indeed contribute. Such a reason, I propose, is provided during the very

process of joining forces, by individuals making each other mutually aware of their willingness to contribute. As the Prospect Clause discussed in section 1 reveals, how much warrant they need, or how likely success has to be in order for an agent to have sufficient reason to act depends on the moral stakes on the one hand and the costs the agent incurs on the other.

Now suppose that one or more individuals flout their duty to join forces due to which such mutual awareness is not established. In such a situation, the members of the collective do not have enough of a prospect to contribute to a successful preventive effort. As a consequence, there is no collective obligation to prevent the harm. This means that the first stage of the duty to join forces, mobilizing others, has to be successfully completed in order for there to be an obligation to prevent the harm. Because of this, the two-stage proposal just presented offers a *dynamic* conception of collective responsibility. Another core feature of the proposal is that the first stage is not directed at the outcome but at approaching other people and thereby making a lateral move. This is why, in the introduction, I characterized the duty to join forces as a *lateral* responsibility. I submit that the duty to join forces provides for a plausible conception of responsibility in many cases in which individuals lack control.

4. THE IRREDUCIBILITY OF THE DUTY TO JOIN FORCES

The duty to join forces applies to unorganized groups that are in a position to prevent a collective harm. The question that remains is whether it is reducible to individual obligations or whether it is irreducibly collective. Recall Feinberg's drowning swimmer example. Each of those who are lolling on the beach has an obligation to save the drowning swimmer. As several individuals have this obligation, it is a collective responsibility. However, given that each can fulfill it on his own, it is reducible to individual responsibilities. The first stage of the duty to join forces differs from this in at least two respects. First, each of those who have a duty to join forces has an obligation to mobilize others. This is a lateral obligation that is directed at other people rather than at the outcome. Second, each individual has reason to mobilize others only because one or more others have reason to do the same. This is because the ultimate goal is to prevent a collective harm. Because individuals have a duty to mobilize, this obligation is reducible insofar as agency is concerned—just as in Feinberg's example. However, because it derives from the collective harm, its content is irreducibly collective, or so I propose (to mobilize others so as to ultimately prevent the harm collectively). I defend this claim in further detail in section 4.1.⁸

At the second stage, the mobilized individuals have a duty to prevent the collective harm. The reductionist will want to say that at this stage each has an obligation to make his or her contribution to the combined effort (Miller 2001, 239–40). Although initially this might appear to be plausible for cases such as Fishpond, it is implausible as a response to Deep Pond. In such cases, the individuals have to act together: they have to form and execute a joint intention. This suggests that the reason they have is joint and therefore irreducibly collective.⁹ Strikingly, a similar consideration applies to cases in which individuals can combine their efforts without acting together. In Fishpond, the neighbors combine their efforts in a rather minimal sense—simply by each stopping to use the solvent relying on the other to do so as

well. Even so, it appears that the joint reason to stop using it is prior to the individual reasons. It is of no use for a particular individual to stop. Instead, they have to stop collectively. This suggests that the obligation that features in the second stage is irreducibly collective.

In order to determine whether this interpretation is tenable, I consider two theses—a reductionist one and a nonreductionist one. The reductionist thesis is a stronger version of the Agency Condition, which I call “the Agency Thesis” (AT):¹⁰

(AT) Any moral responsibility is the responsibility of a moral agent.

Recall that the Agency Condition states that the only agents who bear responsibilities are moral agents. This entails that human beings and nonhuman animals who are not moral agents do not have moral responsibilities. It leaves open that collectives can have responsibilities. In contrast, the Agency Thesis asserts that moral agents are the only entities that do so. This thesis rules out that nonagential collectives can as such have responsibilities. Tracy Isaacs supports this thesis when she argues that “in situations in which collective agency is absent, moral responsibility, if present at all, resides only at the level of individuals” (Isaacs 2011, 100).

The nonreductionist thesis is the Irreducibility Thesis that I mentioned in the introduction (IT):¹¹

(IT) A collective can be responsible for an outcome without any of its members bearing a correlative responsibility.

In standard cases, the responsibility of a collective will distribute to its members (even if it does not reduce to them). IT states that this is not necessarily the case. Instead, there can be cases in which the collective is responsible without any of its members bearing a correlative responsibility, such as the obligation to do their part. Thus, it is possible for there to be a discontinuity between the responsibility of the collective and its members. Such a discontinuity provides for a clear and vivid sense of irreducibility.

In this section, I critically discuss AT and IT. In section 4.1, I argue that AT is mistaken and conclude that unorganized collectives can have responsibilities. In section 4.2, I argue that IT only applies to collective agents. I go on to argue that the responsibilities of nonagential collectives can be irreducibly collective in another sense. In this way, I give further content to my proposal that individuals can have a duty to join forces and, more specifically, that once enough of them have been mobilized, they have a duty to prevent the harm collectively.

4.1 Against the Agency Thesis

According to the Agency Thesis (AT), any moral responsibility is the responsibility of a moral agent. In contrast to the Agency Condition, AT rules out that nonagential collectives can bear responsibilities. The Agency Condition can be made more specific such that the conflict with AT is more apparent: The only entities that can bear moral responsibilities are moral agents and collections thereof. I refer to this as ‘the Revised Agency Condition’. And I argue that it is to be preferred to AT.

Both the Causal Condition and the Epistemic Condition can plausibly be generalized to accommodate collective harms. In section 1, I formulated the (core of the) *Causal Condition* as follows: The agent is able to prevent the harm from occurring. This fails to accommodate examples such as Deep Pond and Fishpond, as they concern multiple agents. However, the condition can plausibly be complemented with a clause for collective harms: The agents can prevent the collective harm from occurring by suitably combining their efforts. Thus, the Revised Causal Condition reads as follows: One agent is able to prevent the harm from occurring or several can do so by suitably combining their efforts.

The Epistemic Condition is satisfied if the agent consciously knows about the pending harm. This condition can be generalized to collections of individuals such that each knows about it. It should also be required that they are mutually aware of the pending harm (or perhaps that it is common knowledge). Recall that according to the Prospect Clause the agent's effort to prevent the harm is sufficiently likely to succeed (given the costs to the agent and the moral stakes). As discussed above, in the collective case this requires that the relevant individuals engender reasons to rely on each other. They can do so by joining forces, a process that issues in mutual awareness (or common knowledge). Thus, the Revised Epistemic Condition can be formulated as follows: The agent(s) consciously know(s) about the pending harm and, if there are several, they are mutually aware of it. Hence, just as the Causal Condition, the Epistemic Condition can be generalized in a plausible way so as to apply to collective harms.¹²

The upshot is that, along with the Agency Condition, both the Causal and the Epistemic Conditions can plausibly be reformulated so as to accommodate collectives. The No-Defeaters Condition does not seem to raise special issues at this point (I discuss it in section 4.2). This means that AT is mistaken. Hence, the second stage of the duty to join forces can plausibly be interpreted in nonreductive terms: a collection of individuals that has joined forces with respect to a collective harm has an obligation to prevent it. Such collective obligations are conceptually prior to the obligations that its members have to contribute. Because they come first in this sense, individuals can in principle derive their member responsibilities from the responsibilities of the collective. This means that, as I proposed in the introduction of this section, the individual obligations do indeed have an irreducibly collective content. What is more, the responsibilities of the collective explain why members have correlative responsibilities. Thus, their conceptual priority is matched by an explanatory priority. In this way, the fact that the harm at issue is collective supports the claim that the obligation to prevent it is collective as well.¹³

4.2 Against the Irreducibility Thesis

The second thesis that I consider here is the Irreducibility Thesis (IT) according to which there can be discontinuities between collective and individual responsibilities. In order for IT to apply to nonagential collectives, it must be the case that the members of a collective can have an excuse or justification that does not apply to the collective as such. The relation between responsibilities and defeaters can usefully be captured in terms of the distinction between *pro toto* and *pro tanto* obligation. In

order for an agent to have an obligation, she has to have sufficient desire-independent reasons to perform an action or bring about an outcome. If these reasons prevail after all relevant factors have been taken into account, it is an all-things-considered, all-out, or *pro toto* obligation. However, it is merely a *pro tanto* obligation if it is defeated: because the agent has an excuse or a justification, she does not have decisive reasons to act. As this distinction suggests, the No-Defeaters Condition plays an important role in any argument in favor or against IT.

In order for IT to apply to unorganized groups, it must be possible for the following two claims to be true at the same time. First, a nonagential collective has a *pro toto* obligation to prevent a harm. Second, due to excuses or justifications, its members do not have *pro toto* obligations to contribute to preventing the harm. If these two claims are true, the relevant collective exhibits a responsibility gap. Now, in order to understand why IT is surprising or at least informative, it is best understood against the background of what David Copp (2007, 374) calls “the transfer doctrine”: Collective *pro toto* obligations entail *pro tanto* member obligations. A responsibility gap is such that the collective has a *pro toto* obligation, while the *pro tanto* member obligations are defeated. This in turn can be true only if the defeating conditions at the member level need not scale up. More precisely: It must be possible for the member excuses and justifications not to defeat the responsibility of the collective.

In particular this last observation is crucial for a proper evaluation of IT for the kind of collectives at issue. Consider Deep Pond once again. Suppose that Singer and Unger are rushing towards the pond. Unger steps in a rabbit hole in the ground, falls, and breaks his leg. From that point onwards, he is excused and cannot reasonably be expected help save the drowning man. It appears, however, that the pair of them is excused as well. Think of Unger as providing Singer with another pair of arms and legs that he needs in order to prevent the pending death of the man. As one of these legs is now broken, it seems Singer is excused, just as Unger is. Now, if both are excused, there seems to be no sense in which the collective obligation survives Unger’s accident. It appears that the defeaters that apply to the member level scale up to the level of the collective. Singer and Unger no longer have a joint obligation to save the man together, simply because they are not anymore in a position to do so. It follows that there is no responsibility gap in Deep Pond.

Similar considerations apply to Fishpond. Suppose that Alice is willing to stop using the polluting solvent, while Bertha is not. This implies that Alice is excused. Presumably, Bertha can be blamed for being unwilling to take appropriate action. Now, what about the collective? Arguably, Bertha’s unwillingness also incapacitates the collective as a whole. Given her dispositions, it is simply false that Alice and Bertha can prevent the fish in the pond from dying. There is no relevant sense in which the collective is able to do so. This suggests that the collective is excused, just as Alice. In other words, the defeater that applies to the member level scales up to the level of the collective. If this is correct, there is no discontinuity between the collective and individual obligations in this case. Hence, Fishpond does not successfully support IT.

At this point, one might object that there is a relevant sense in which the collective is able to prevent the harm. If only Bertha were willing to do her part. I have argued, however, that the collective has an obligation only if the members can rely on each other to contribute to a coordinated effort. And, in order for this to be the case, Alice and Bertha have to join forces. Given Bertha's dispositions, there is no way Alice can convince her to stop using the solvent if he does. Because of this, there is no collective obligation in the situation at hand. *A fortiori*, there is no discontinuity between collective and individual responsibilities. Instead, Alice and Bertha each have a duty to join forces. To be sure, it remains true that it would be good if the fish were saved. However, there is no corresponding collective responsibility to do so.

IT has considerable plausibility when it comes to collective agents (French 1984; Copp 2007; Pettit 2007). When the collective is an agent, it is conceivable that the excuses and justifications that apply to it differ from those of its members. Consider, for instance, a member of a large company whose child falls seriously ill and requires constant care. Arguably, this overrides many of his member obligations. However, a large company can hardly, if at all, excuse a failure to fulfill its responsibilities by referring to considerations of this kind. After all, it could have taken precautionary measures such that it would be suitably prepared for situations such as this one. This suggests that in this case there is a discontinuity between collective and individual responsibilities. It is, however, far from obvious that a similar discontinuity can arise between an unorganized group and its members.

A collective agent is constituted by its members (Uzquiano 2004; Hindriks 2012). This supports the idea that it has causal powers of its own (Baker 2007). In contrast, nonagential collectives are composed by their members. To the extent that it makes sense to talk of composite causal powers, these are not located at a distinct ontological level. Instead, they are simply the combined causal powers of the members of the collective. Also, rather than to a distinct agent, any reasons they have apply to the members in combination. This implies that insofar as unorganized groups are concerned member excuses and justifications scale up. And if this is true, it cannot be that no member bears a responsibility with respect to a harm while the collective as such does. Those factors that defeat member obligations will also excuse or justify the collective such that it is not responsible. In light of this, I propose to formulate 'the Revised No-Defeaters Condition' as follows: The agent or collective does not have an excuse or justification. The thing to see, however, is that the excuses and justifications of nonagential collectives supervene on those of their members. Because of this, IT does not apply to nonagential collectives. In other words, even though such collectives can bear responsibilities, there can be no discontinuities between their responsibilities and those of their members.

The upshot is that IT does not apply to nonagential collectives. Unorganized groups cannot have excuses or justifications that are discontinuous with those of their members. Both the falsity of AT and the limited applicability of IT have been supported by generalizing the four conditions of moral responsibility in plausible ways from agents to collectives thereof.

5. PUTTING THE DUTY TO JOIN FORCES IN PERSPECTIVE

In order for it to have an irreducibly collective responsibility, an unorganized group has to be in a position to prevent a collective harm. Others have defended more liberal interpretations of this condition than the Revised Causal Condition just defended. In this section, I briefly and critically discuss two arguments that have conclusions that reach farther than mine. One of them targets AT directly. The other is a defense of IT for nonagential collectives (and thereby targets AT indirectly). I discuss them not to exhaustively evaluate them, but to put my own proposal into perspective and facilitate a comparison. Along the way, I illuminate some of its attractions.

5.1 The Potentiality Argument

Some harms can be prevented only by a collective agent. However, in some such cases, there will not be a collective agent that is able to prevent the harm at issue. Even so, there might be an unorganized group that can transform itself into an organized group that does have the requisite ability. When this is the case, the reductionist can claim that the members of the unorganized group have a duty to organize themselves (Collins 2013). If they were to do so, the resulting collective agent would have the responsibility to prevent the harm. It has been argued, however, that the duty to prevent the harm can already be attributed to the collective prior to it becoming a collective agent simply because it has the potential to become one. This is the core claim of what I call ‘the Potentiality Argument’. It has most recently been defended by Bill Wringe (2010; 2014; 2016; see May 1992 for an earlier version). If it is true, AT is false.

Wringe criticizes AT for requiring that the bearer be an actual agent. He argues that the fact that an unorganized group is not yet an agent need not block the ascription of responsibilities to it, as long as it can become one. In order for an unorganized group to be a potential agent, it must be in a position to initiate a causal process that prevents the relevant collective harm. As part of this process, it forms a collective agent. Since it can do all this, the argument continues, the unorganized group can as such have the responsibility to do so. Thus, a nonagential group can bear responsibilities due to the fact that it can be transformed into a collective agent.

The commitments involved in the Potentiality Argument are rather strong. Just as the duty to join forces, Wringe’s proposal requires attributing obligations to unorganized collectives. This means that he has to reject the Agency Condition in favor of the Revised Agency Condition (the only entities that can bear moral responsibilities are moral agents and collections thereof). The duty to join forces supports the ascription of collective responsibility only to the extent that the members of the relevant group are in a suitable position to discharge it. Wringe defends a significantly stronger claim: “collectives which are not agents but which have the potential for agency, can be the subjects of *actual*, and not merely potential obligations” (2016, 14). This might mean one of two things. First, unorganized groups can have responsibilities if they are potential agents. Second, in addition to actual agents, potential agents can have responsibilities. The second interpretation is suggested by his claim that the collective agent owns the obligation. However, he also argues that the

members of the unorganized collective are its addressees (2010). They are answerable for fulfilling the obligation (Wringe 2014, 175). Irrespective of which interpretation is correct, the Potentiality Argument entails that *the agent that has the reasons differs from the agents that respond to the reasons*.¹⁴

A similar disparity arises with respect to the Causal Condition. Wringe's proposal requires generalizing the Causal Condition from agents to nonagential collectives. In other words, he accepted the Revised Causal Condition (one agent is able to prevent the harm from occurring or several can do so by suitably combining their efforts). This revision is needed to capture the fact that the members can organize themselves. However, Wringe takes a further step by attributing the duty to prevent the harm to the unorganized group. This creates an incongruence similar to the one just discussed. The agent who is able to prevent the harm is the organized group that has yet to be created. However, the responsibility for the preventive effort is attributed to the unorganized group. Thus, the Potentiality Argument entails that *the agent that has the ability differs from the unorganized collective that is held causally responsible*. A similar argument can be developed for the Epistemic Condition. In all three cases, the Potentiality Argument violates the plausible assumption that the entity that meets the responsibility conditions is the entity that has the responsibility. Because of this, I reject the Potentiality Argument and retain the Revised Agency Condition.¹⁵

5.2 The Ability Argument

The second argument, which is meant to support IT, starts from the observation that people might be unwilling to contribute to a collective effort to prevent a harm. Suppose that this holds for all members of a collective each of whose contribution is needed for successfully preventing the harm. And suppose that this is a matter of mutual awareness. Under these conditions, unilateral contributions are futile. After all, a single contribution has no effect on the collective harm. As a consequence, each of them is excused. This in turn means that none of them is obligated to contribute. It remains true, however, that the individuals would prevent the harm if they were to combine their efforts or if they were motivated as they should be. Because of this, the argument concludes, the nonagential collective is as such responsible for preventing the harm. The upshot is that the unorganized group has an obligation to prevent the harm, even though none of its members has a correlative obligation. In this way, the argument is meant to support IT, more specifically the version of this thesis that is forward-looking and applies to nonagential collectives.

As this argument concerns what the collective is able to do, I refer to it as 'the Ability Argument'. It has most recently been defended by Gunnar Björnsson (2011; 2014; see Feinberg [1968] for an earlier version). Björnsson (2014) illustrates the Ability Argument in terms of a variant of Fishpond.¹⁶ In addition to Alice and Bertha, Claudia lives at the water and paints her boat regularly using the toxic solvent. As it happens, none of the three distant neighbors is willing to do so. This means that none of them are in a position to do so. Hence, none of them has an individual obligation to contribute in this manner.

At the same time, however, the unorganized group would succeed in preventing the harm if its members were appropriately motivated. After all, in this situation they are willing to contribute. Furthermore, they are ready to express their willingness to each other. Björnsson observes that this is what they should do: “A member of the group has a *pro tanto* obligation to make others aware of her readiness to contribute toward that end (perhaps by explicit offer, or by some modest first contribution)” (Björnsson 2014, 218; cf. Feinberg 1968). Because of this, they will in all likelihood become mutually aware of each other’s motivational dispositions. This means that, in morally ideal conditions, the three neighbors are in a position to do so. It follows that both the causal and the moral responsibility of an unorganized group can come apart or be discontinuous from those of its members. The upshot is that (AT is false and that) IT can be true of unorganized collectives.

Björnsson maintains that, even though the agency resides in the individual members, the ability to act “pertains to the group as a whole” (Björnsson 2014, 217). This suggests that the Ability Argument suffers from the same problem as the Potentiality Argument: the responsibility conditions are satisfied by different entities. In this case, the individual members satisfy the Agency Condition, whereas the collective meets the Causal Condition. On closer inspection, however, this is not the real problem. There is nothing wrong with the claim as such when evaluated in terms of the Revised Agency Condition and the Revised Causal Condition. The former allows for collections of moral agents to bear responsibilities. And, according to the latter, it suffices if several can prevent the harm by suitably combining their efforts.

The problem resides instead in the way in which the Revised Causal Condition is evaluated. Suppose Alice changes her mind and becomes willing to contribute. This is as such of little help given that a single person cannot prevent the harm all by herself. Now, consider the fact that Alice would be able to contribute to a successful preventive effort if Bertha and Claudia were to change their mind as well. Why would this be relevant to the assessment of their responsibilities? Their unwillingness blocks the ascription to the individuals. It seems that it thereby blocks the ascription with respect to the collective.

As discussed in section 4.1, a successful argument against IT must show that the member excuses and justifications not to defeat the responsibility of the collective. Björnsson will claim that he has done so by arguing that in morally ideal conditions the collective is able to prevent the harm. However, his proposal does not provide for a legitimate way of evaluating the abilities of a collective. The abilities of a collective agent have to be evaluated at the collective level (Hindriks 2008). However, this does not hold for unorganized groups. As the relevant groups are not agents, they do not as such have abilities (Lawford-Smith 2015a). In order for an unorganized group to meet the Revised Causal Condition, the individuals have to be in a position to prevent the harm by suitably combining their efforts. This, however, is not the case. The upshot is that the Ability Argument provides no good reason to revise the conclusion that I drew in section 4.2: IT does not apply to nonagential collectives.

6. CONCLUSION

Some harms can be prevented only if several individuals act. I have argued that, in such situations, individuals can have a duty to join forces. This duty consists of two stages. First, individuals have to mobilize others. Second, they have to make a coordinated effort to prevent the harm. Mobilizing others is a matter of getting others to join the collective endeavor—of getting them to express their willingness to contribute to the coordinated effort conditional on enough others doing the same. The obligation to mobilize others is an obligation of individuals. However, as it ultimately concerns a collective harm, its content is irreducibly collective.

The duty to join forces is a lateral responsibility because individuals direct their attention initially, not to the outcome, but to other individuals. The underlying idea is that, only if enough people have joined the endeavor, each can rely on the others to contribute such that their coordinated efforts are successful. When the mobilizing efforts have generated a suitable prospect for success, a collective obligation to prevent the harm comes into existence. This obligation is irreducibly collective because it applies to the collective as such or to all of the relevant individuals in combination. It pertains to the collective harm in its entirety and it is conceptually and explanatorily prior to the responsibilities of the collective. However, it exists only to the extent that its members are in a suitable position to discharge it.¹⁷

NOTES

1. The duty to join forces applies to situations in which the agents need not form a new collective agent in order to prevent the harm. See Held (1970), Collins (2013) and note 15 for cases in which this is required. Note that, just as a group of individuals, a collection of existing collective agents such as NGOs or states can have a duty to join forces.
2. From this point onwards, I use the term 'responsibility' for moral responsibility unless otherwise qualified.
3. I formulate the conditions in the present tense, for forward-looking responsibilities. Backward-looking responsibilities can be accommodated by reformulating them in the past tense.
4. Arguably, the members of collective agents have to collectively accept or even endorse the collective decision procedure (Tuomela 1995; Pettit 2017). Furthermore, they can, or perhaps have to, feature a division of tasks and roles (French 1984; Tuomela 1995). Schmid (2014) argues that they have to have a minimal form of first person of authority.
5. French (1984) argues that McDonnell-Douglas is a moral agent. See Copp (2006), Pettit (2007), and Hindriks (2018) for other defenses of collective moral agency. For reductive interpretations of the responsibility of organized groups, see, for instance, Velasquez (1983).
6. Lawford-Smith (2015b) proposes a duty to signal or an obligation to express their conditional willingness. This signaling duty differs from the duty to join forces in three ways. First, it also requires individuals to encourage others to do the same. Second, the relevant individuals have to coordinate their actions or cooperate. The third difference is that Lawford-Smith regards the duty to signal as part of the duty to incorporate or form a collective agent, as proposed by Collins (2013). The duty to join forces concerns harms that can suitably be prevented without incorporation.
7. This example is inspired by Björnsson's (2014) Lake example. In section 5.2, I discuss how he uses it to support the Irreducibility Thesis mentioned in the introduction.
8. Wringle (2016, 12–13) criticizes a proposal that is somewhat similar to the duty to join forces—a primitive individual obligation to cooperate—for getting the phenomenology backwards. In relevant cases, he suggests, the collective obligation appears to be prior to the individual obligations. As I see it, the pending harm warrants a collective moral concern in light of which individuals can conclude that they have a duty to join forces. Furthermore, as just argued, the content of their individual obligations is irreducibly collective. These two considerations, I submit, captures the phenomenology Wringle is concerned with.

9. See Gilbert (1989) and Tuomela (2005) for accounts of joint intentions on which they are irreducibly collective.
10. Wringe formulates a similar thesis to which he refers as 'the Agency Principle': "Only agents can be the subjects of moral obligation" (Wringe 2010, 220).
11. I introduced this term in Hindriks (2009). French (1984), Copp (2006), and Pettit (2007) defend IT for collective agents. See section 5 for defenses of IT in relation to nonagential collectives.
12. Sometimes the thing to do is simply to start contributing. This is a loud and clear expression of willingness to do so. Furthermore, doing so might also encourage others to express their possibly conditional willingness as well. Finally, it provides others with a reliable basis for coordination, and thereby serves to satisfy the Prospect Clause.
13. See Tamminga and Hindriks for a logic of collective obligations that makes this more precise.
14. See Lawford-Smith (2012) for a critique of Wringe on this point.
15. As mentioned in section 3 and 5, individuals can also have a duty to incorporate (see also notes 1 and 6). Just as the duty to join forces, this is an individual obligation with an irreducibly collective content. It provides for an attractive alternative to Wringe's (2010; 2014; 2016) conception of collective responsibility for harms that can only be prevented by means of collective agents. See Collins (2013) for a reductionist version of this idea.
16. As mentioned in note 7, Björnsson (2014) refers to 'Fishpond' as 'Lake'. He uses the label 'Known Reluctance' for the variant discussed in the main text. Note that he assumes that the fish would be saved if two of them were to dispose of the solvent in a safe way.
17. I thank the audiences at the following events for useful comments: Aspects of Collectivity at the University of Bristol (2014), the Ethics of Economic Institutions at the University of Utrecht (2015), Collective Responsibility at the University of Helsinki (2017), and the OZSW Seminar on Moral Responsibility at VU University Amsterdam (2017). I am also very grateful for valuable feedback from and discussions with Olle Blomberg, Gunnar Björnsson, Stephanie Collins, Niels de Haan, Holly Lawford-Smith, Abe Roth, Kai Spierkermann, Allard Tamminga, and Bill Wringe.

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